

There Goes the Neighbourhood:

● The Social Role, Real and Perceived, of

● Two New Light Rail Lines in North America

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Key to maps

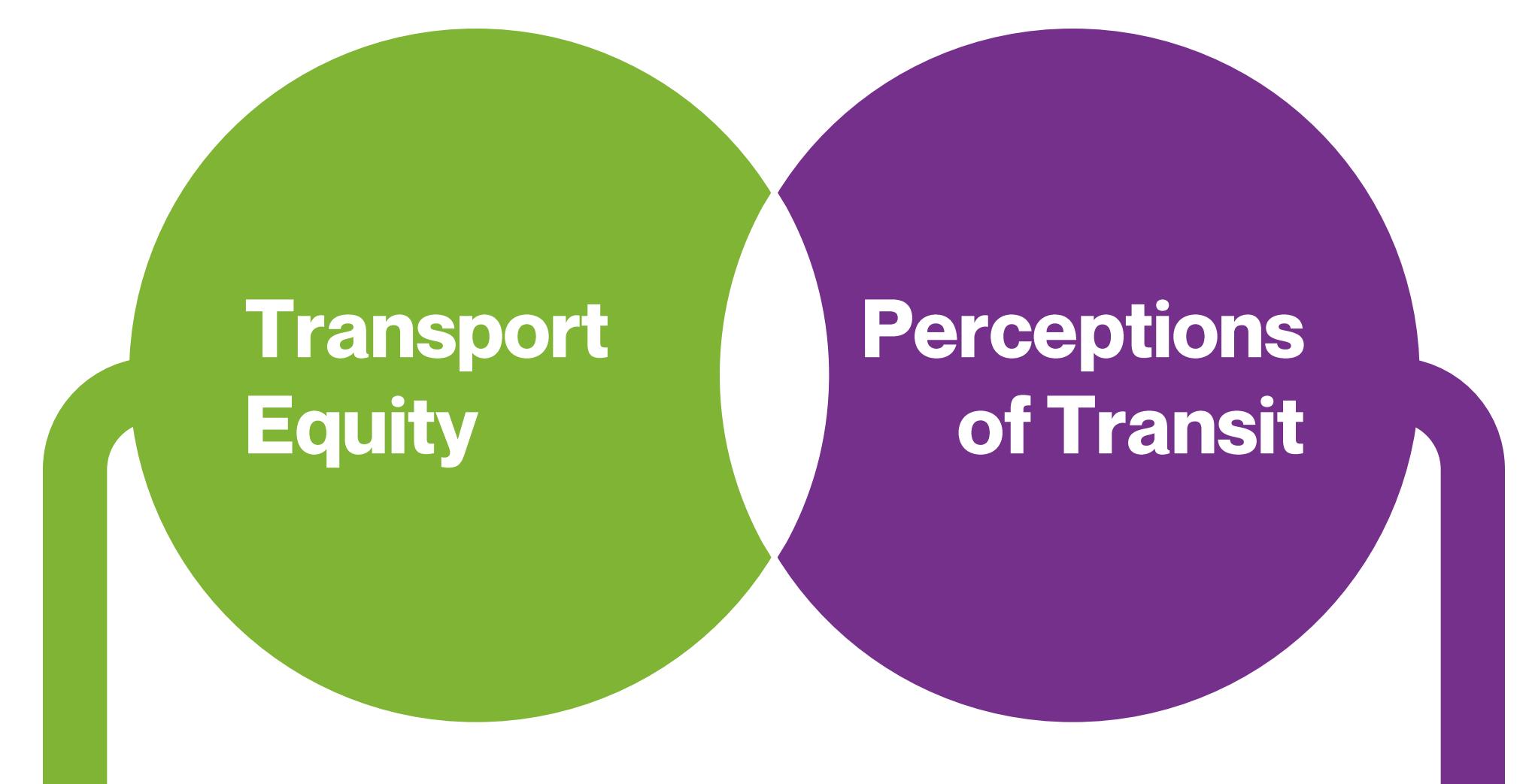
Larger circles indicate higher z-scores (and higher socio-economic status) for areas around stations

● Abstract

- New light rail projects are a common feature of North American cities; however, it is not always clear which communities are benefiting from these investments in transport infrastructure.
- Previous research has examined the impact of light rail lines on social equity, as well as perceptions of light rail as a mode, but not necessarily in conjunction with one another.
- I integrated these two concepts to conduct a comparative study of two new light rail projects: the Réseau express métropolitain (REM) in Montréal, Canada and the Purple Line in the Maryland capital region, United States.

● Conceptual Framework

Literature Review



1. Which communities do the REM and Purple Line serve?

2. Which communities are the projects perceived to serve?

Methodology

Quantitative Analysis

- Census data on income, poverty, housing, race, education, and commuting
- t-tests comparing socio-economic indicators near transit before and after new lines are built
- Station-level analysis using z-scores

Key Informant Interviews

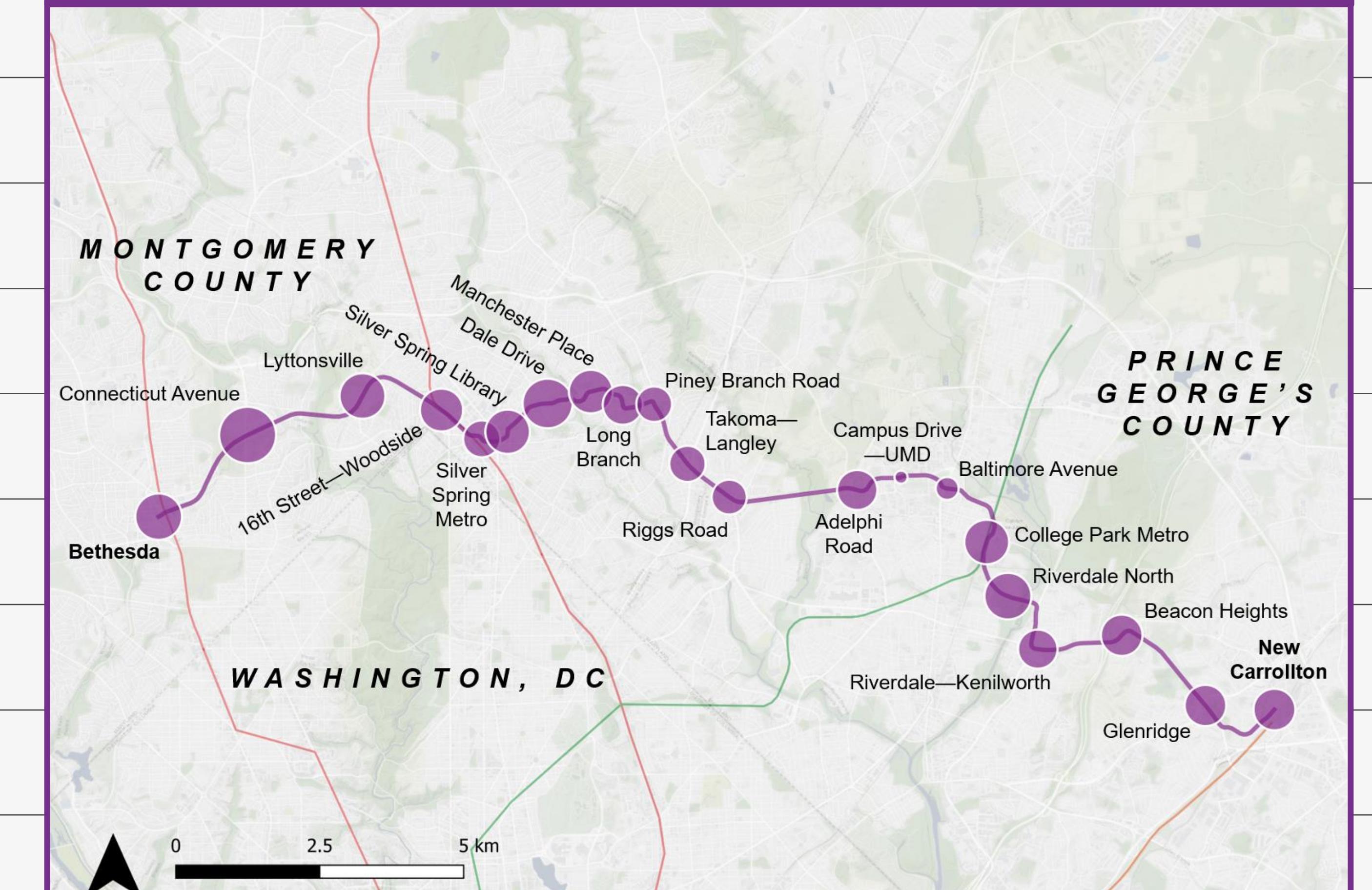
- Eight semi-structured interviews with local officials, activists, and planning experts
- Key informants offered insights on behalf of their communities
- Coded transcripts to analyze repeated themes

● Réseau express métropolitain, Montréal



- The REM serves parts of the Montréal area that are higher in socio-economic status than those covered by the existing Métro system.
- On average, neighbourhoods served by REM stations have higher incomes and homeownership rates, more university graduates, and less poverty. They are also less dense and characterized by car dependency.
- Interviewees noted how the route neglects the entire eastern half of the Island of Montréal, which is a lower socio-economic status area with inadequate service.
- The semi-privatization of the REM under the provincial government's pension fund, the CDPQ, is a perceived equity issue. The route serves many of the CDPQ's existing commercial real estate holdings.
- There are also perceptions of apathy among the public toward discussions of equity. The REM remains broadly supported because of the seductive imagery of a new train line.

● Purple Line, Maryland



- The Purple Line serves parts of the Maryland capital region that are lower in socio-economic status than those covered by the existing DC Metro system.
- On average, neighbourhoods served by Purple Line stations have lower incomes, fewer university graduates, and higher poverty. Many have high immigrant populations.
- Interviewees highlighted the line's east-to-west routing that integrates affluent and poorer areas as key to their perceptions of its equity.
- Similar apathy to that found in Montréal means communities along the line have primarily sought to mitigate its perceived downsides, such as on processes of gentrification.
- Planners may not have set out to improve social equity in the region, and more could be done, but currently they have done better than their Canadian counterparts.



● Conclusions

- The Purple Line appears to be better meeting the basic social service and fairness goals of ideal public transport infrastructure. In both reality and in public perception, the social role of the REM can be said to be on a different and less equitable track.
- Communities along the lines are generally disconnected from the planning process, and there is not critical public engagement with equity concerns. Instead, economic development goals are prioritized.
- The phenomena I identified are relevant to similar projects in North America; however, this was not an exhaustive study and there are additional factors involved, such as engineering feasibility.